

October 25th, 2020

The House That God Built

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Conforming the Church to the world

We are entering our fourth chapter and Paul is *still* dealing with the same subject he began in chapter one. There were factions and divisions in the Church. Why? Because the Corinthians were judging *the Church* and *its ministers* and *each other* according to the way that the world thinks. This is one of the problems that plagues every local Church down to this day. We bring into the Church worldly categories. Sometimes this is done so innocently because we just aren't thinking clearly. So we attempt to market our local Church, by providing an entertaining atmosphere, or by adopting the therapeutic mindset to meet felt needs, or we continually developing the next big program in order to keep people coming back. But this turns the local Church into a product. Paul labors in these verses to unfold the true nature of a Church—*who* its leaders are, *what* the scope of their work is, *who* they are accountable to—not from the world's perspective *but from God's perspective*. And this is so vital for you to grasp! Why? Because any other view will lead to the Corinthian problem: worldliness, division, and arrogance in the Church.

The Namaan in our own hearts

Remember the story of Namaan? Naaman was a commander in the Syrian army. A mighty warrior, but he was struck with leprosy. His servant girl told him that Elisha the prophet could heal him. Elisha gave him this command in **2 Kings 5:10** “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.” But Namaan responded “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage.”¹ What was

¹ v.12

Namaan's problem? He was thinking only in worldly categories: 'Our rivers are better than Israel's rivers.' He didn't regard Elisha's word, he ignored the prophet of God's own word. Now thank God Namaan's servant plead with him, and he changed his mind and washed in the Jordan. We read in v.14 "...his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." Some of you are just like Namaan *before he changed his mind*—you believe that the world's healing waters are better than what we can find in the Church." Some of you are not that negative, but practically speaking, Church is a take it or leave it event for you. Some of you believe that Church is indeed important, but you are seem to always be dissatisfied with it because you are constantly measuring it against the rivers of Damascus. Loved ones, my plea with you this morning is to adopt God's view of the Church. Adopt God's view of His ministers, adopt God's view of their work, adopt God's view of their accountability. The Church is not a human invention. It is the house that God built. He is the architect, the builder, and the chief inhabitant.

The Big Idea...

Only when we see the Church and her ministers from Christ's perspective will we begin to be what He designed us to be

- ☆The Master of the House (v.1)
- ☆The Appraiser of the House (v.2-4)
- ☆The Illuminator of the House (v.5)

I. The Master of the House

View the Church like this, *not* like this

Please look with me at v.1 “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Remember the Corinthians had adopted the very modern view of celebrity pastors. Just like Corinth had celebrity philosophers that were measured against each other, the Church had turned their pastors into celebrities and were measuring them against each other.² Here Paul gives a command: “This is how one should *regard* us...” Meaning, ‘this is how you should *think* about us.’ The *us* here refers to Paul and Apollos and Cephas, and by extension every pastor that follows. Don’t you find it remarkable that the Scripture tells us how to *think* about our ministers? Of all the things that Scripture could tell us—*especially in 2020*, while we face a global pandemic, civil unrest, and perhaps the most important political election in our lifetime, Scripture is going to say: “Hey I want you to think carefully about the Apostles of old, and the pastors that serve you.” But of course this would have been *just as strange* for the Corinthians to hear. They faced the same challenges we do. Imagine New York, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles all rolled into one.³ That was Corinth. Not only was truth a commodity that could be bought and sold by politicians, but their sexual immorality was only rivaled by Sodom of old. While homosexuality and transgenderism are the issues of our day. Cultic prostitution was the issue of their day. And in the midst of all that, Paul is going to tell them “Hey this is how I want you to think about us?” ‘How obscure, and obtuse. Paul you are so small minded. No wonder why the Church seems to be drifting more and more into irrelevant oblivion.’ That is of course who the world would respond to such a command.

² Their opinions of Paul: 2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6; 12:11

³ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Lectio Continua: Expository Commentary on the New Testament: First Corinthians*, (Powder Springs, GA.: Tolle Lege Press, 2013), pg.xxix

1. Regard us as *servants*

How does he want us to think about him? He gives us two answers. **First**, he says v.1 “This is how one should regard us, as *servants of Christ...*” *Servants of Christ*. The Greek word is ὑπηρέτης hypēretēs. A ὑπηρέτης hypēretēs was an under rower or a subordinate rower. In the ancient ships, there would be three levels where slaves would be forced to row the ship. The lowest of the slaves would row on the bottom level. They were in *the most* subordinate position. If you remember, Paul designated a different Greek term for ministers back in **3:5**. It’s the same English word “servants” but the Greek is διάκονος diakonos and it referred to table-waiters or busboys. But here Paul adopts the lowest term that he can. Apostles and pastors are not just table-waiters or bus-boys, not just ordinary slaves, but the lowest of the low: we are third tier galley slaves. Paul is saying that is how you should view ministers of the gospel.

Not servants of the Church *but of Christ*

But notice Paul doesn’t call himself or others *servants of the Church*. He will say that in other places. But ministers are *not* first and foremost servants of the Church at all. No they are first and foremost slaves—the lowest slaves—of Christ.⁴ In other words, ministers do not answer to the Church *ultimately*, they answer to Christ.⁵ Why is this so vital to emphasize? Because the minister’s *main calling* is not to please men but to please Christ. Paul says in **Galatians 1:10** “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”⁶ Whenever a leader’s main objective is to please people, rather than God, it

⁴ It’s true that in Corinthians 4:5, Paul calls himself a δοῦλος doulos (a servant) of the Church. But this proves the point. A δοῦλος doulos was not the lowest slave, but just an ordinary slave. A ὑπηρέτης hypēretēs on the other hand was lower than a δοῦλος doulos. Though ministers are a δοῦλος doulos to the Church, they are a ὑπηρέτης hypēretēs to Christ.

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:3-4 “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him”

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 2:4 “But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

always ends in disaster. Think of King Saul of old. He disobeyed the Lord when He was commanded to put the Amalekites to death, he spared Agag and some of the spoil. He lost the kingdom because of it, and many had blood guilt on their hands because of Saul's subsequent exploits. What was his downfall? Out of his own lips, Saul says in **1 Samuel 15:24** "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, *because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.*" He was not a servant of Christ, but of the worldly whims of the people.

Experimental ὑπηρετίας

Dear brother pastors and deacons, do you realize this about yourselves? Do you count yourselves as slaves to Christ before even the people of this congregation? Are you aiming to please Him in how you serve? Or are you more concerned with the opinions of men? Elder trainees, consider carefully how you proceed. Eldership is not a club. If Christ calls you to this ministry, He's not calling you to sit on the top of the ship to give orders, He's calling you to the lowest galley to row with your blood, sweat and tears. Dear congregation, you will do well to remember this. You may get angry and frustrated with us at times, but consider, what if your desires are at cross with those of Christ's? Who should we please? You should praise God if your pastors are willing to make you cross if it's to please Him. That's the **first way** Paul wants us to regard the Apostles and our ministers: as servants of Christ.

2. Regard us as *steward*s

Next we see the second way. v.1 "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ *and stewards of the mysteries of God.*" A steward is a different kind of slave. A steward is manager of a household. When Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, he became a steward of Potiphar's house. **Genesis 39:4** says that Potiphar "...made [Joseph] overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had." As a steward, Joseph was a *dispenser*, meaning, he had the duty of making sure every other servant, and Potiphar's children, and

Potiphar's suppliers had the proper portion allotted to them. He was in charge of all receipts and expenditures. It was required of him that he dispensed Potiphar's property to wherever it needed to go. Calvin uses the imagery of the steward taking it from the hand of his master and placing it in the hand of those in his care.⁷ Children, hopefully you help your mom unload the groceries from the car whenever she gets back from shopping. At our house, Monica will often stand at the back of the van and direct where these groceries are supposed to go. She will grab a bag in her hand, and place it in the hand of our boys, and they will put it where she tells them. That's the a picture of a steward. They take what is given to them in their hand, and dispense it where they are told. They are not free to dispense the things they have been given to them in whatever way they want. Whenever God has called prophets of old, or apostles, or pastors, He has made it clear that they are only allowed to speak what He speaks. When God called Ezekiel to the ministry, He told him in **Ezekiel 2:7-8** "And you shall *speak my words* to them...*hear what I say to you*. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you." When God called Jeremiah to the ministry, **Jeremiah 1:8-9** says "Then the Lord put out his hand and touched [his] mouth. And the Lord said to [him], "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth."⁸ Ministers are only allowed to speak and explain what God has spoken.

Stewards of the *mysteria* of God

But Paul shows us their stewardship is unlike any in the whole world. **v.1** says they are "...stewards of *the mysteria* of God." Paul has already told us what he means by the mysteries of God back in **2:7**. The mystery of God is specifically the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's what ministers are required to steward. But why does Paul refer the gospel as a *mystery*? Because it cannot be discovered by human reason. Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue and *discovered* the new world. Aristotle using his brilliant mind *discovered* the

⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XX*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: BakerBooks 2009), pg. 150

⁸ cf. Paul's calling in Acts 9:6, 15

laws of logic. Galileo through his telescope was able to *discover* the four massive moons of Jupiter. All sorts of knowledge God has hidden in the world for man to discover. **Proverbs 25:2** says “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.” But the gospel is the mystery that cannot be discovered by human reason. The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it like this:

“Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation.”⁹

Where is the gospel found? In the Scripture. And how does the world *experience* the gospel found in the Scripture? Through the ministry of the Church. **Romans 10:14-15** “And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?”

What does the world need most today?

Do you see now *why* Paul’s command in v.1 is not obtuse and obscure? Is it more philosophers and scientists that will solve the world’s problems today? Do we just need more doctors or disease experts? Do we just need more politicians, or the right type of politicians? No, a word from men cannot cure us.¹⁰ Only a word from God can. And that Word comes through preaching. The preaching of the cross is the power of God unto salvation. Loved ones, what did God send to heal that cruel city of Nineveh that was wholly swallowed up with paganism? He sent Jonah the preacher. Jonah carried the mysteries of God to Nineveh and they found life. On the day of Pentecost, what did Jesus send to those Jews who monstrously crucified Him? He didn’t send an earthquake to

⁹ WCF 1.1

¹⁰ Jeremiah 6:14 “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”

swallow them up in judgment. No, he sent a preacher of peace—Peter, a steward of the mysteries of God—so that those rebels might be reconciled unto Him. What were the instruments God used in the Reformation to turn the darkness to light in the 16th century? Preachers. How did the Lord bring salvation to the nations during the Great Awakening in the 18th century? Through the ministry of preachers. The Reverend William Paxton preached a message on May 13, 1884 entitled: *The Church, the Preacher, the Pastor—the Instruments of God’s Salvation*. And he said this “All the great victories in behalf of truth, civilization and salvation have been achieved by the preacher’s power.”¹¹

How can he say that? Is that because there is something special about the preacher himself? No. He’s a third tier galley slave. But he is a steward of the mysteries of God. Therefore his speech carries with it an immortal power that is able to crush thrones, and break the fetter of tyrants; it is a power that God uses to resurrect those who are spiritually dead, and to proclaim liberty to the captives; it is a power that reconciles holy God and rebellious man; it is a power that grants everlasting life. There’s nothing like it in all the world. All great victories on earth only come through the house that God built, namely the Church. That’s our **first point**. We must never think about the Church or her ministers in worldly categories. What the world needs most today is to hear a Word from Heaven. And our Lord Jesus Christ speaks to us every week through His ministers. They are His stewards. He is the Master of this house.

II. The Appraiser of the House

The only absolute requirement

Please look with me at **v.2** “Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.” God doesn’t require the same things out of His ministers that

¹¹ Rev. William M. Paxton from his message “The Church, the Preacher, the Pastor—the Instruments of God’s Salvation” in *Princeton and the Work of the Christian Ministry*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), pg. 355

the world requires. The world requires ministers to be brilliant or clever or funny or popular.¹² But God only requires one thing from them—faithfulness, trustworthiness—that they would *only* give to the people of God what they received from God. As Calvin said, it is a hand-to-hand ministry. Ministers are simply to take God’s Word from—*not* adding to it, nor taking away from it—but taking it as it is and faithfully feeding it to God’s people. They are not responsible for the results. Not so with the what the world requires. Worldly thinking says: ‘if ministers are worth their salt, they will have big ministries.’ I praise God for those faithful men of God who have large ministries. But that is not the measure of faithfulness.¹³ God told the prophet Ezekiel in **Ezekiel 2:7** “And you shall speak my words to them, *whether they hear or refuse to hear...*” Faithfulness is not measured by results, but whether or not the minister delivers to the Church the whole counsel of God. Paul told the Church in Ephesus as he was departing from them for the last time: “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (**Acts 20:26-27**). That is the only absolute requirement of a steward in God’s house: did they declare all of God’s Word to God’s people? Did they feed Jesus’ precious lambs?

Faithfulness for love’s sake

Loved ones, don’t you see? The reason Christ requires that His ministers be faithful is because He loves His Church, His Bride, His body, with all of His heart and and all soul. The last thing Jesus charged Peter with concerning His beloved Church was a three-fold command “Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...

¹² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, (Chicago, IL.,: Moody Publishers, 1984), pg. 99

¹³ Joseph was a faithful steward in Potiphar’s house even though Potiphar threw him in prison. Remember that Potiphar’s wife wanted to sleep with him? This is what Joseph told her: “Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, *because you are his wife*. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (**Genesis 39:8-9**).

feed my sheep.”¹⁴ How great is Jesus’ compassion for us when He ascended into Heaven, that if He had to part with us, His most pressing concern was that we tended to and nurtured, that are wounds would be bound up and dressed with oil, that we would be fed true manna from Heaven. Jesus requires His ministers to be faithful stewards not only so that God’s glory would be known, but also so that His little lambs would find strength, that the lost be found, that the thirsty would find living water.¹⁵ Jesus requires His ministers to be faithful because His Church is His greatest concern on earth. He has a holy anxiety over us. Every hair on our head is counted, all our days are written in His book, every tear is kept in His bottle. His thoughts to us are more than the sand. So He gives the strictest charge: “...it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.”

Nobody on earth can judge me

Then Paul takes this abrupt turn in **v.3**. He leaves the Heavenly realms and returns to earth. **v.3** “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.” It is a very small thing—that is, “it amounts to nothing,”¹⁶ if I am *judged*. The word judged means means examined or estimated for worth. 1 and 2 Corinthians are peppered throughout with judgments that the Corinthians were making of the very man who birthed Christ in them. In **2 Corinthians 10:10** they judged him to be weak in his bodily presence. A chapter later in **11:6** they judged him to be unskilled in speaking. This was the Corinthian error, they judged according to

¹⁴ John 21:15, 16, 17. Read Ezekiel 34 for an extended view of God’s care for His tender lambs.

¹⁵ This is seen expressly in Jesus’ call of Paul in Acts 26:16-18 “But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the ...the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Jesus commands Paul to be faithful to this end so that He could bring His loved ones to Himself.

¹⁶ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2018), pg. 66

worldly standards. They made Samuel's mistake. Remember when Jesse's sons passed before him, and he fixed his eyes on Eliab the oldest and said 'surely this is the Lord's anointed.' But the Lord said to Samuel in **1 Samuel 16:7** "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." The Corinthians were just like modern Americans, obsessed with superficial appearances, or superficial pedigrees. So Paul in response, gives three shocking statements: **1) You are not my judge; 2) The world is not my judge; 3) I am not my judge.** Let's take those one at a time.

1. You are not my judge

First he tells the Corinthians in **v.3** "...it is a very small thing that *I should be judged by you.*" Paul is *not* forbidding the Church to make judgments. Just look ahead to **5:12** "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church *whom you are to judge?*" Making sound judgments is one of the responsibilities of the local church. A pastor's life and doctrine should be examined or judged. That is one of the qualifications of a pastor in **1 Timothy 3:1-7**. Furthermore, if a pastor persist in sin, Paul tells us to rebuke them in the presence of all (**1 Timothy 5:20**). The Church has to judge. Godly judgment is one of the ways that we can distinguish between a true and false teacher (**Matthew 7:15-20**). So Paul is not forbidding the Church to make judgments. What Paul is rebuking is the Corinthians judging according to worldly standards —the show and pomp¹⁷ that the world adores is not to be the measuring stick in the Church.

Screwtape's strategy

C.S. Lewis captures this best in his imaginative classic *The Screwtape letters*. The demon Screwtape is writing to his underling Wormwood,

¹⁷ Calvin, pg. 154

instructing him how to deceive his patient—a Christian man—into abandoning the faith. This is what he says:

Surely you know that if a man can't be cured of church going, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that 'suits' him until he comes a taster or connoisseur of churches...the search for a 'suitable' church makes the man a critic where the Enemy [God] wants him to be a pupil.¹⁸

The Corinthians were critics of their pastors, not their pupils. That was their error. Paul says that type of judge is means less than nothing to him.

2. The world is not my judge

Secondly, he tells the Corinthians in v.3 “...it is a very small thing that I should be judged...*by any human court.*” This verse is on vivid display in many places across the country. John MacArthur is going to have his day in court for violating California’s laws regarding Coronavirus restrictions. But that hasn’t prevented him and Grace Community Church from continuing to meet. Why? Because he understands that the world isn’t the final judge on whether he is being faithful to Christ or no.

¹⁸ “What He wants of the layman in church is an attribute which may, indeed, be critical in the sense of rejecting what is false or unhelpful, but which is wholly uncritical in the sense that it does not...waste time in thinking about what it rejects, but lays itself open in...humble receptivity to [all] nourishment that is [taking place]” C.S. Lewis, *Paved with Good Intentions: A Demon’s Road Map To Your Soul*, (New York, NY.: Harper Collins, 2005), pg. 5-6. Screwtape in another place says this: “One of our great allies at present is the Church *itself*. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees...when he gets to his pew [is] that selection of neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like ‘the body of Christ’ and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy’s side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbors sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion just be somehow ridiculous.” *ibid*, pg. 2-3

3. I am not my judge

Thirdly, Paul tells the Corinthians at the end of v.3 “In fact, *I do not even judge myself.*” This is the most shocking statement of the three. Paul is saying that his own judgment is not any more reliable than anyone else's when it comes to whether he is faithful or no. One author puts it like this:

“All of us are naturally inclined to build ourselves up in our own minds. We all look through rose-colored mirrors. Even when we put ourselves down, especially in front of others, we often are simply appealing for recognition and flattery. The mature minister does not trust his own judgment in such things any more than he trusts the judgment of others.”¹⁹

Assurance of faith?

Now Paul is quick to say in v.4 “For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.” Now the older KJV uses the word *justified* in stead of *acquitted*, so it reads like this: “For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not *justified* by this.” And the Greek word for both *acquitted* and *justified* is the same word that Paul uses in Romans 3 and 4 when he teaches the glorious doctrine of justification by faith alone. In light of this, some older Catholic commentators used this passage to undermine the assurance of salvation. Remember they reject the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, they believe that a true believer can lose their salvation. So they essentially translate this verse to say, “Just because your conscience doesn’t condemn you, it doesn’t mean that you are really justified, or made righteous in God’s sight.” But this is to tear the verse completely out of its context. The verse isn’t talking about how to find assurance. It’s talking about whether or not a minister is being faithful in his office or not. Paul is saying “just because I think I’m being faithful as an Apostle, doesn’t make it so.” In other words “I am not the judge.” He tells us who is at the end of v.4 “It is the Lord who judges me.”

¹⁹ MacArthur, pg. 101

It is the Lord who judges me

Only Christ is capable of judging whether His ministers are ultimately faithful or not, because He has the one who has appointed them to the work. This is the antithesis of the passage. The Corinthians were acting as if they were adequate to judge what was happening in the Church. And Paul says: “Not, it is the Lord who judges.” This means that pastors should not be offended when they are criticized nor puffed up when they are praised. Rather we ought to follow the words of the Apostle Paul in **2 Timothy 2:15** “Be diligent to present yourself *approved to God* as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”

Experimental appraisal

Dear congregation, please examine your own heart. Why is Paul pressing on this point so? Is it not because, it is not our most natural tendency is to become critics of the Church rather than pupils? Some of the most discouraging days that a pastor faces is when the message is preached and for some people it's like water breaking against granite cliffs. No penetration. No absorption. Why is that? I'm convinced it's because there are Christians who are blind to how critical their heart has become. If that's you this morning, let me just ask you: do you like being a critical person? Does that bring you joy? When was the last time you woke up on Lord's Day morning and said to yourself: 'I get to hear the Lord speak to me this morning! The galley slave of Christ is going to unfold the mysteries of God to me! I'm going to hear a Word from Heaven.' Don't you see? That is what is offered every Sunday. Are you a pupil or a critic? That is our **second point**. The only Judge, the only Appraiser of the house of God, is Christ Himself.

III. The Illuminator of the House

Do not pronounce judgment before the time

Please look with me at **v.5** for the conclusion of the matter. “Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.” Here Paul gives us the second command of the text: “Do not pronounce judgment before the time.” He’s speaking about the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only when Christ comes will everything that is in the darkness come to light. In **Ephesians 5** Paul speaks about those things hidden in the darkness as wicked things. But that is not his point here. He’s telling us to not judge His ministers before that Day, because the criteria needed to judge is hidden until then. Only then, Paul says halfway through **v.5** will Christ “disclose the purposes of the heart.” As Charles Hodge says “Whether a man is faithful in preaching the gospel depends up his motives.”²⁰ Paul tells us in **Philippians 1:17** that some preached the gospel out of selfish ambition. But beloved we will not be able to see that until the day Christ returns. It is He alone that is the great revealer, the great illuminator of men’s hearts. **Revelation 2:23** says “And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.”

Jonathan Edwards’ Farewell Sermon

Jonathan Edwards one of the chief figures in the Great Awakening in the 18th century was fired from his Church in Northampton over a dispute over who was qualified for Lord’s Supper. His people judged his doctrine according to worldly standards, and tragically parted ways with the greatest theologian America has ever seen. He preached his farewell sermon on June 22, 1750. His doctrine for that sermon, what we call our big idea was this: “Ministers and the

²⁰ Hodge, pg. 68

people that are under their care, must meet one another before Christ's tribunal at the day of judgment."²¹ He said this about that Day:

"Ministers are set as guides and teachers, and are represented in Scripture as light set up in churches; and in the present state meet their people, from time to time, in order to instruct and enlighten them, to correct their mistakes, and to be a voice behind them, when they turn aside to the right hand or the left, saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it;" ...*But when Christ shall come to judgment*, every error and false opinion shall be detected, all deceit and delusion shall vanish away before the light of that day, as the darkness of the night vanishes at the appearance of the rising sun²²...the meeting at the last day, of minister and the people that have been under their care, will not be attended by any one with a careless heart²³...[for] there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed...all will be examined in the searching penetrating light of God's omniscience and glory, and by him whose eyes are as a flame of fire...and then our hearts will be turned inside out, and the secrets of them will be made [plain]."²⁴

Edwards felt the weight of Paul's words. The vast ocean of eternity is a sobering reality.

What's missing from the text?

Paul says it is on that day when, end of v.5 "...that each one will receive his commendation from God." Commendation means "...praise, applause, approval, honor." Clearly Paul is excluding false teachers, who will receive nothing from God but the most terrible damnation. He's limiting his scope to saved ministers.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 1*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth, Reprinted 2009), pg. cc

²² *ibid*, pg. cci

²³ *ibid*, pg. ccii

²⁴ *ibid*, pg. cciv

But what's curious here is what is excluded. Notice what's missing. It only says that they shall receive their commendation—their praise—from God. In other words, they will be praised by God *for all the ways they have been faithful*. But what about all the ways they have been *unfaithful*? Think of all the ways that ministers of old have been unfaithful in their calling. Moses sinned in front of all the people and as a result couldn't go into the promised land (**Number 20**) David in the incident with Uriah and Bathsheba (**2 Samuel 11**) Hezekiah's pride (**2 Chronicles 32**). Peter's hypocrisy in dividing up the Church along racial grounds, undermining justification by faith alone (**Galatians 2**). Brother pastors, what about all the ways that we have been unfaithful to our calling, failing Christ and those whom we have been called to serve? The text doesn't say that we will receive praise for the good *and* punishment for the bad. The bad things aren't even mentioned. In fact whenever the NT speaks about the judgment seat of Christ, it only speaks about praise not punishment. Think of the parable of the talents in **Luke 19** where the master goes away and leaves his servants one mina each. The first servant earned an additional ten minas, the second who had began with the same one mina only five. But both were called faithful, both were praised. The only punishment that occurred was on the wicked servant who accused his master of being a severe man (**Luke 19**). Other examples would show the same—that at the judgment, praise is what God's servants get not punishment. Why? Because Another has taken their punishment for them. The sins and failures of ministers don't fall on themselves. They fall on Christ. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. That's why we saw back in chapter three, that all their worthless deeds—the wood, hay, and stubble—are burnt up. They suffer loss, but not punishment. They still have their souls, they still have eternal life with Christ.

No punishment but praise for the saints of God

The same is true for you loved ones. On that Day when you meet with Christ and your ministers, when all things will be laid bare, you will not be punished, but praised. Yes it's true that you will have sinned against Christ in

many ways. Yes it's true that you have committed some of your worst sins since you have been a Christian. But because Christ was punished for you, buried for you, and was raised on the third day for you, they cannot be marked against you. God is not an unjust judge. He will not punish Christ for your sin, and then punish you again for the same. So only praise remains. What type of people should that make us be? How can we continue to judge with worldly standards in the Church, when our final judgment is so unworldly. How can we be critical of one another, when Christ has promised to burn up all those things in us on that last day?

But for those of you who have not believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. These things cannot be said about you. You will not hear praise from God on that final Day, but only the dreadful sentence: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."²⁵ If you take refuge in Jesus Christ by faith, you will not escape that Day. Every sin you have committed in thought, word, and deed will be brought up against you, and the weight of your punishment will be more than you can bear. I plead with you to repent this very morning. Turn away from the worship of yourself, turn away from your indifference toward God. Turn to the Lord Jesus Christ and receive Him by faith. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."²⁶

²⁵ Matthew 25:41

²⁶ Romans 6:23